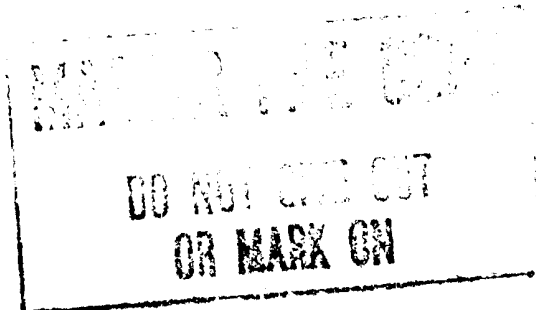




Director of
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Likelihood of a Syrian-Israeli War

Special National Intelligence Estimate

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SNIE 36.7/35-86
July 1986

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LIKELIHOOD OF A SYRIAN-ISRAELI WAR

Information available as of 24 July 1986 was used in the preparation of this Estimate, which was approved by the National Foreign Intelligence Board on this date.

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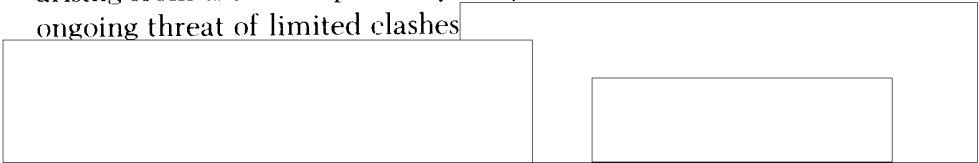
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SCOPE NOTE

This Estimate examines the prospects for a major Syrian-Israeli conflict by the end of the decade. It also considers Syria's and Israel's strategies and their capabilities to implement these strategies. In our view, it is the fundamental perceptions and long-term strategies that provide the backdrop to decisionmaking and the prospects for hostilities. Accordingly, this Estimate focuses on the likelihood of a major war arising from the incompatibility of Syrian and Israeli goals as well as the ongoing threat of limited clashes



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KEY JUDGMENTS

The prospects are high that before the end of this decade a Syrian-Israeli conflict will occur—possibly full-scale war—which would have major implications for US interests:

- Syrian President Hafiz al-Assad is determined to press the Arab struggle against Israel, to achieve a “strategic parity” which would create a credible military option, and to recover the Golan Heights. President Assad’s pursuit of “strategic parity” means not only building a credible military deterrent, but also increasing Syria’s diplomatic leverage. Assad believes Syria cannot preserve its regional clout, its influence over any Arab-Israeli peace process, and leading hardline role on the Palestinian issue unless he can preserve a credible military option. Volatile pressures will result particularly from Syria’s efforts to diminish Israel’s residual influence in Lebanon, and Syria’s continuing sponsorship of terrorist acts.
- For its part, Israel seeks to maintain military preeminence over any combination of Arab forces, to defend its territorial integrity, and to guarantee its long-term survival. Volatile pressures will result particularly from growing sentiment among the Israelis that their forces should launch preventive strikes to destroy the threat of Syria’s growing power. [REDACTED]

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Neither Israel nor Syria is eager for a major clash in the near term, but there will remain considerable danger that such a clash may occur, either through accident or design. Furthermore, recent events have increased odds for a clash, as well as the risk that hostilities will be harder to control. In periods of high tension, events could well unfold very quickly, with both sides—but Israel in particular—seeing compelling advantages to acting swiftly and massively. [REDACTED]

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Whatever the case for the near term, the risks of conflict will intensify over the next few years:

- Assad believes US support for Israel and Israel’s military superiority makes a satisfactory negotiated settlement impossible; he sees military force—or at least the threat of war—as Syria’s only realistic long-term option. Although we lack good information regarding Syrian war plans, we believe Assad is trying to develop the capability to mount a surprise attack on

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the Golan, hoping Syria would achieve limited territorial successes and a cease-fire would be implemented before Israel had fully mobilized its reserves.

- We do know that Assad has pushed hard to develop a deterrent to prevent Israeli retaliation against Syria's infrastructure: this deterrent includes chemical weapons and surface-to-surface missiles. There is an outside chance he would use such weapons if, in a full-scale war, Israel were wreaking massive destruction within Syria.
- For their part, the Israelis are very worried by Assad's dogged pursuit of "strategic parity." They see it as narrowing their military options and threatening their maintenance of an effective deterrent. The true depth of their concern is difficult to assess because they have several reasons to exaggerate the Syrian threat. But Israel has definitely not lost the will or ability to move boldly to defeat Syria. If Israel should become convinced that war is imminent or that the Syrian buildup had reached intolerable levels, we believe the Government of Israel—whether Labor or Likud—would not hesitate to launch a massive attack designed to destroy Syrian forces quickly while minimizing Israeli losses.
- The Israelis believe—and we agree—that they could quickly halt a surprise Syrian attack and move to the offensive. Despite Syria's achievement of rough numerical parity in the last few years, Israel has retained—and most analysts believe will increase—its overall superiority. In the event of a full-scale Israeli ground offensive, we estimate that the Syrian Army would be thoroughly defeated within no more than two weeks.

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As for the prior detection of war preparations:

- *The Israelis' ability to monitor and analyze Syrian preparations for war has declined somewhat in the past year, but is still excellent.*

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- *Syrian capability to monitor Israeli preparations for an attack is poor.*

- The US ability to detect and evaluate preparations for war between Israel and Syria has declined during the past year,

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The US capability remains fair to good, but *we will continue to have difficulty providing timely, unambiguous warning of an Israeli-Syrian war.*

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US leverage. The United States has little leverage over Syria. The United States has only limited influence on Israel's calculations, and we believe Israeli leaders, if convinced of an imminent Syrian threat, would be prepared to initiate hostilities without US acquiescence. A Labor government would be more likely than Likud to seek at least tacit US approval.

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The USSR. We doubt that Assad would give or agree to any Soviet role in a decision to attack the Golan Heights. The Soviets would likely oppose a Syrian decision to attack, fearing Damascus would suffer a major defeat. Nonetheless, in the event of war the Soviets would almost immediately begin military resupply. The Soviets might also send a small military force to Syria, but this would only be considered in the context of an Israeli march on Damascus or if the Syrian regime were on the verge of collapse.

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Other Arab states. For the remainder of the decade, no Arab state is likely to provide significant military support to Syria in a war. A conflict would almost certainly involve Lebanese territory and airspace, but it is much less likely that Jordan would be drawn in. Aside from Lebanon and Jordan, Egypt would be the Arab state most affected by a conflict: Cairo would be compelled to freeze its relations with Israel, even if Syria were the unequivocal aggressor and were rapidly defeated. We believe a future conflict could cause some internal problems for moderate Arab states but would not lead to any regime's collapse.

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On the whole, any major conflict between Syria and Israel would adversely affect US interests:

- It would spur more terrorism.
- To the extent Arab states rallied behind Syria, the United States would, at least over the short term, lose influence with its moderate allies, particularly Egypt and Saudi Arabia, due to Washington's close identification with Israel.
- A triumphant Israel would have even less incentive to make concessions to the Arabs.
- Syria probably would call for, and doubtless succeed in, convening an Arab summit on the Arab-Israeli issue with strong anti-US overtones.

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On the potentially positive side:

- As in 1973, a war might be a catalyst for serious movement in the peace process. The United States, still the only major power that can engage in a meaningful dialogue with each side, would almost certainly be the mediator should a dialogue emerge.
- If the war resulted in a rapid Israeli victory, the United States might profit from the strategic shift resulting from the loss of Syrian power and influence, and a Syria that had suffered a devastating defeat would be less able to stymie future US peace efforts or to threaten US allies in the region.

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DISCUSSION

The Syrian-Israeli Rivalry

1. Syria and Israel are at loggerheads. Syrian President Hafiz al-Assad is the only frontline Arab leader determined to press the Arab struggle against Israel and to recover the Golan Heights. Israel, on the other hand, seeks to maintain preeminence over any combination of Arab forces, to defend its territorial integrity, and to guarantee its long-term survival. In so doing, as long as a peace treaty with Syria is not forthcoming, Israel is determined to retain all the Golan Heights.

Recent Developments

2. Events of the past year have underscored the judgment

that at least limited hostilities between Syria and Israel are likely before 1990. Tensions between the two have been intensified by:

- Syria's success in thwarting a US-brokered Lebanese-Israeli accord, causing Israel to abandon its larger goals in Lebanon and revert to its former security zone strategy.
- The Israeli shootdown of two Syrian fighters over Syria in November 1985 that led Assad to deploy surface-to-air missiles along the Lebanese border, challenging Israeli reconnaissance flights.
- Syrian military construction in Lebanon and the southern al Bika', beginning in January 1986, suggesting it intends to reoccupy territory from which the Israelis have withdrawn.
- The temporary deployment into Lebanon of Syrian mobile SAMs (SA-6 and SA-8) and construction in Lebanon of air defense command, control, and communications facilities.
- The Israeli intercept in February of a Libyan civil aircraft returning senior Syrian officials from Tripoli to Damascus.
- Syrian involvement in terrorist operations against Israeli targets.

3. These and other events of the past year increase both the odds of a clash, either through accident or

design, and the risk that it will be harder to control. We believe, moreover, that pressure by Israeli hard-liners for retaliation is building:

- Had the April effort to destroy an El Al flight from London succeeded and had Israel uncovered evidence of Syrian complicity, a major retaliatory attack would have been certain and might have included the first airstrikes on targets inside Syria since the 1973 war.

Long-Term Trends

4. Since the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty, Syria has sought to achieve "strategic parity," a flexible and ambiguous phrase that Assad uses to describe Syria's ability to confront Israel alone. By this he means building a credible military deterrent, increasing Syria's diplomatic leverage, and developing the socio-economic base to eliminate the "quality gap." He also uses it to justify Syria's diversion of economic resources for the military buildup at a time when Syria is financially hard pressed.

5. While we do not believe Assad is capable of attaining his goal of strategic parity within the period of this estimate, Assad has:

- Reorganized and significantly expanded his armed forces, particularly the Army and air defense.
- Acquired new, more sophisticated weapons from the USSR.
- Rebuilt and then extended Syria's military and political influence at the expense of Israel and the United States.
- Pushed the development and production of chemical bombs and missile warheads, as a deterrent and possible weapon of last resort.

6. As Assad has relentlessly pursued his long-term goal of strategic parity, Israeli civilian and military leaders across the political spectrum have become increasingly concerned about Syrian capabilities and intentions. While Israeli leaders often magnify their threat assessments of Syria to enhance their requests for arms from the United States, we believe Israel is

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genuinely alarmed by the Syrian buildup. They see military options narrowed by each incremental Syrian improvement. Israel is also concerned about Syria's reconciliation with Jordan and the possibility of improved Syrian-Iraqi ties. Israel opposes any inter-Arab strategic cooperation. We doubt, however, any of the numerous Arab diplomatic contacts to improve Syrian relations with its immediate neighbors will have a significant impact on the military balance. []

7. The United States has sought to avoid major conflict by brokering tacit accommodations between Israel and Syria. The United States, however, has little leverage over Syria. The United States also has only limited influence over Israel's calculations. We believe, if Israeli leaders were convinced of an imminent Syrian threat, they would be prepared to take preemptive action without US acquiescence. A Labor government would be more likely than Likud to seek at least tacit US approval. []

Syrian Strategy

8. We believe Assad sees preservation of Alawite dominance in Damascus as his fundamental objective. The Assad regime pursues an agenda largely dominated by Syrian nationalist goals: return of the Golan, domination of Lebanon, pan-Arab leadership, and economic development of the country. In this context, the Palestinian issue serves in part as a means of obtaining financial and economic aid, military assistance, and political backing from other Arab states and the Soviet Union. Key elements of Syria's large and expensive military establishment serve to keep the regime in power in the face of potential Sunni opposition. It also makes Syria the only true "confrontation state" in the Arab world. Syria's break in relations with Morocco in response to the Peres-Hassan summit illustrated the intensity of Assad's determination to confront Israel and maintain Syria's central role in the Arab-Israeli dispute. This status provides Assad considerable stature in the Arab and Islamic worlds, and makes Syria an attractive client for the Soviets. []

9. Assad's nationalist image and the justification for his enormous investment in military hardware revolve in large part around regaining the Golan Heights. Of course, there is virtually no prospect Israel will return the Golan—in one sense a convenient situation for Assad, since the conflict with Israel is what generates the economic, political, and military support Syria now obtains from various Arab states and the Soviet Union. []

10. Syria is preparing for eventual hostilities, fearing Israel will attack it, while at the same time seeking a strategic parity to force Israel into returning the

Golan Heights and to dramatically alter the course of the Arab-Israeli struggle. While President Assad is under no immediate pressure to force a showdown with Israel, recovery of the Golan Heights (lost in 1967 when he was Defense Minister) and securing major concessions on broader Arab-Israeli issues are of considerable psychological and political importance to him. Assad believes that US support for Israel makes a satisfactory negotiated settlement impossible, and thus he sees the use of force—or at least the threat implicit in Syria's military buildup—as his most viable option. []

11. [] Egypt's conclusion of a peace treaty with Israel in the late 1970s led President Assad to decide that Syria must be prepared to fight Israel alone in the next war, and he authorized a major expansion and modernization of his armed forces—primarily the Army—which has been liberally supported by the USSR. The 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon reinforced this trend and spurred improvement of the air and air defense forces. Syria has focused on improving air defense missile, radar, and command, control, and communications systems; and acquiring more sophisticated interceptor and ground attack aircraft (see charts). While Syria has essentially attained overall numerical parity, Israel still enjoys qualitative superiority. []

12. Since the mid-1970s, President Assad also has pushed hard to develop a deterrent to prevent Israeli retaliation against Syria's infrastructure. Syria has earmarked its brigade of Scud surface-to-surface missiles and a portion of its fighter-bomber force to deliver chemical warheads. []

[] Although Assad considers chemical weapons to be a deterrent, there is an outside chance he would use them if, in a full-scale war, Israel continued to wreak massive destruction within Syria. Israel almost certainly will attack Syria's chemical warfare capabilities at the beginning of a major war. []

Assad's Aims

13. [] we believe President Assad wants to develop the capability for a quick strike to recover all or part of the Golan Heights and then to call immediately, with Soviet support, for a standstill cease-fire. In so doing, Assad probably wants to seize what territory on the Golan he can quickly and thereafter fight as much as possible on the defensive—for which the Syrians are reasonably well-trained and prepared. In this scenario Assad probably would count heavily on achieving both strategic and tactical surprise. []

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Assad's Recent Comments on Strategic Parity and the Arab-Israeli Conflict**27 February 1986**

"If the Israelis work to put the Golan within their borders, we will work to put the Golan in the middle of Syria and not on its borders."

8 March 1986

"When we raised the slogan of strategic parity several years ago, we realized that this does not only mean balancing a tank with a tank and a gun with a gun, but also balancing all aspects of life—the political; manpower; and social, cultural, economic, and military aspects. Neglecting any of these elements will inevitably create a weakness in the body of this balance of which we are speaking. We also realized that this matter cannot be achieved overnight, but will require the appropriate time and effort. We realized that and acted accordingly, and we have covered reasonable ground."

17 April 1986

"The problem is clear: Israel wants to expand, and the United States seeks hegemony. These Israeli-Zionist expansionist designs and this imperialist US desire to dominate the region are the reasons for the tension. The United States, in cooperation with Israel, wants to make this region in which we live serve its plans and strategy. It also seeks to impose on us the regime or regimes it wishes and to define for us our way of life. This is rejected. We have not responded or submitted, and we will not respond or submit to it in the future. We will fight."

"I cannot see any other means to achieve peace in this region except through an international conference under UN auspices and to be attended by the USSR and the United States. The strange thing is that they reject this international conference and Soviet participation in it, while we do not reject the United States' participation in the conference despite its blind bias toward Israel."

18 May 1986

"We are not planning an attack on Israel, but are planning to achieve parity between us and Israel, because without the parity between us and Israel, it will be difficult to achieve peace. There is a lot of talk about parity. We have confidence in ourselves. We need more time to reach parity of force. However, if we are attacked, we have the power to defend ourselves."

14. In planning to retake the Golan Heights, we judge Assad believes that any such attack would result in a large-scale Israeli riposte to destroy as much of his armed forces as possible and threaten Damascus. A successful large-scale counterattack could risk the survival of his minority Alawite regime and Syria's territorial integrity. [REDACTED]

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15. Assad undoubtedly would prefer to regain lost territory and champion the Palestinian cause through a combination of threats, brinkmanship, and diplomacy, but if that fails he may conclude that his only chance lies in an attack, despite the risks. [REDACTED]

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16. Although Syria's military buildup is aimed at enabling Damascus to face Israel alone, Assad would, of course, like to avoid this. Assad, who planned the 1973 war jointly with Cairo, would like Egypt to return to the Arab confrontation camp. However, we believe this is most unlikely and, in fact, Assad himself does not appear to regard it as a serious possibility. [REDACTED]

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17. Even if Assad cannot add to the ranks of the confrontation states, he wants to worry the Israelis and, if possible, complicate their planning and tie down part of their forces. We believe this may be an element of the tentative reconciliation with Jordan and would be part of Assad's strategy in any future rapprochement, however unlikely, with Iraq. [REDACTED]

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Short-Term Behavior and Policies

18. While President Assad continues his military buildup, he must work to limit the effects of, if not solve, some vexing problems that could impede his drive for strategic parity. For example, Assad probably cannot do much in the near term to boost Syria's flagging economy except to push for expanded domestic oil production and possibly implement some modest economic reforms. [REDACTED]

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19. As Syria continues to build up its armed forces, President Assad will try to avoid provoking a major confrontation with Israel. Assad probably will continue pushing the Israelis but will proceed cautiously. Possible Syrian actions include:

- Military reoccupation of territory in the southern al Biqa' from which the IDF has withdrawn.
- Use of military force against the Christian heartland in Lebanon.
- Expanding air defense coverage along the border and in Lebanon.

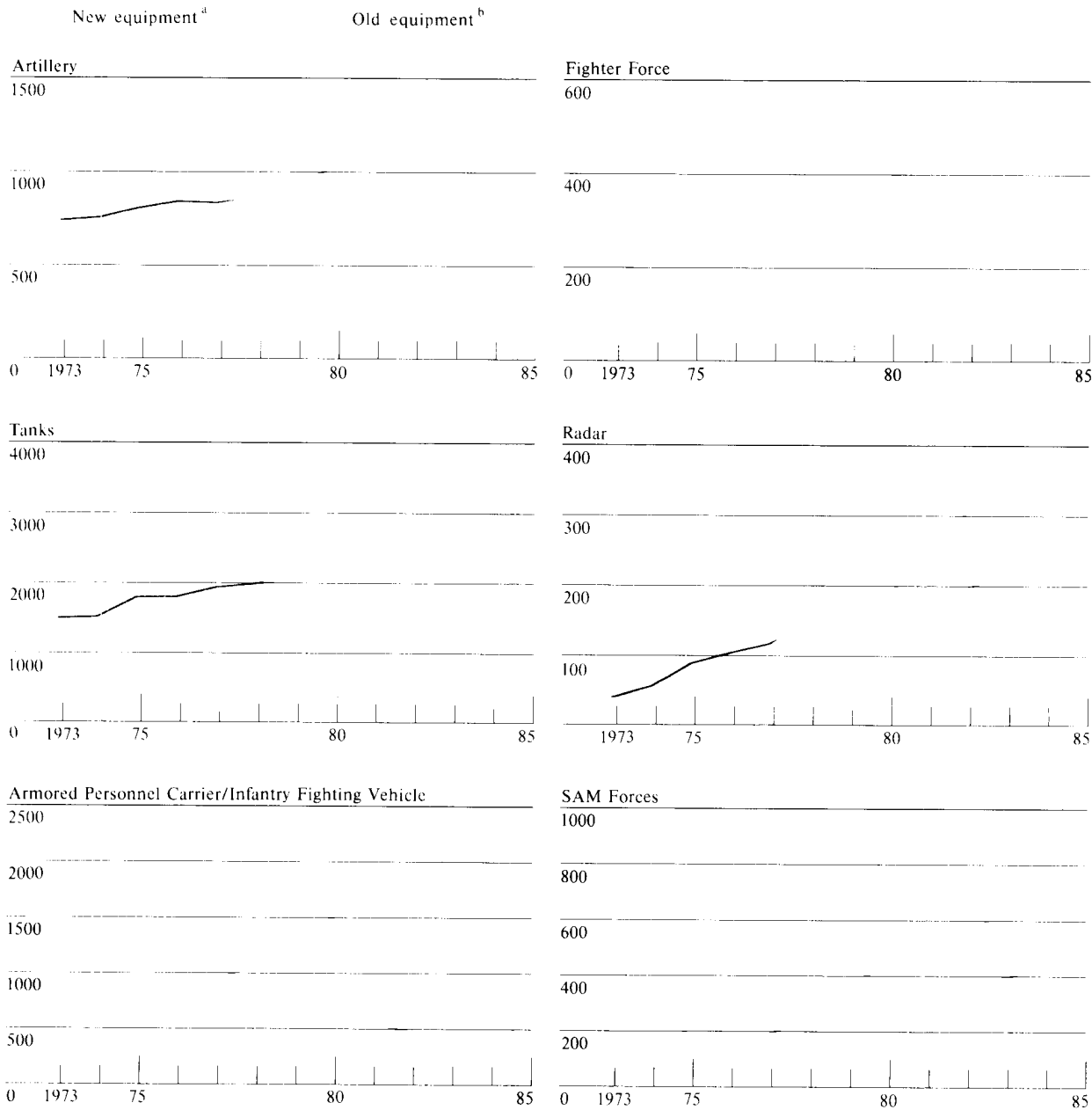
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Figure 1
Inventory Trends of Syrian Military Equipment

Note change of scale



^a In service since early 1970s.
^b In service before early 1970s.

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— Continuing to encourage attacks by Lebanese and Palestinians against the Israelis and their surrogates in Lebanon and—more dangerously—northern Israel. [REDACTED]

20. Despite the considerable risks of such actions, President Assad clearly intends to keep eroding Israel's influence and presence in Lebanon. He particularly wants to eliminate the pro-Israeli Army of South Lebanon, preferably through proxies, and to control the type and timing of attacks in southern Lebanon and northern Israel. He also wants to bolster Syrian defenses south of the Beirut-Damascus highway, hoping to prevent, in event of war, an Israeli advance toward Damascus through Lebanon. [REDACTED]

Syria's Decisionmaking Calculus

21. Assuming that Israel does not launch a major preventive or preemptive¹ attack, we estimate that Damascus's military buildup may lead it to conclude that it is ready to retake the Golan Heights toward the end of the decade:

- While Syria's chronic economic problems probably will hamper its military buildup, we believe that Assad gives little weight to economics in reaching strategic decisions. Consequently, we judge that he will not be tempted to attack in the near term so as to elicit additional Arab aid or distract public attention from these problems. Conversely, we estimate that he will not be dissuaded from attacking by later improvements in the economy that may stem from increased domestic oil production.
- Similarly, we believe that neither lingering internal security problems nor strains among his key supporters will prevent Assad from pursuing strategic parity. Barring a major deterioration in the President's health, Assad will be able to control, but not solve, the problems among his important backers, including Rif'at.
- We also estimate that any Syrian decision to provoke a major confrontation would not be significantly affected by a change in government in Israel. However, a major gap in our information on Assad is how he assesses various Israeli leaders. Although the turnover this fall of the Israeli premiership in the national unity government to Likud, or a subsequent installation of a hardline government could lead Assad to moderate his short-term policies, his long-term strategy will not be affected.

¹ A *preventive* attack is one initiated in the belief that military conflict, while not imminent, is inevitable, and that to delay would involve greater risk. A *preemptive* attack is one initiated on the basis of incontrovertible evidence that an enemy attack is imminent. [REDACTED]

— Syria's war decisions probably would not be affected by Soviet activities and advice. We believe that Damascus will avoid the risk of compromise by informing Moscow of its military intentions only at the last moment. We would expect, however, that Syria would cautiously sound out the USSR's position and consult with Soviet advisers on an ad hoc basis in formulating its military plans. [REDACTED]

22. Although President Assad will seek the advice of his key supporters, we believe that he alone will decide whether, and when, to attack. His health may play an important role and is a major element of uncertainty in our analysis. There is a fair possibility that Assad—who suffers from heart problems, diabetes, and possibly a severe blood disorder—will be incapacitated or die within the next few years. We believe there is some chance that, consciously or unconsciously, he might adjust his strategic calculations should his health begin to fail markedly, raising the possibility that he will embark on a bolder military course. Alternatively, his attentions may be absorbed by internal issues. [REDACTED]

23. When Assad dies, we do not know whether a successor government will be more or less confrontational toward Israel. His key Alawite and other supporters will be anxious to preserve their perquisites and may well work together to form a government. At least initially any such regime would be a caretaker government that probably would be reluctant to make a fateful decision such as launching an attack on Israel, although it probably would continue to build up Syria's armed forces. On the other hand, there is a real possibility of major instability. In any case, none of the likely successors is as experienced in brinksmanship as Assad, increasing the likelihood of major hostilities arising through accident or miscalculation. Moreover, a weak leader may seek to bolster his position through a confrontational approach to Israel. [REDACTED]

Israeli Strategy

24. The Israelis are seeking to maintain military preeminence over any combination of Arab states. They believe such superiority alone guarantees their long-term survival and enables them to readily defend Israel's territorial integrity. [REDACTED]

25. Israelis believe their country is more secure now than at any time since 1973. Their ties to the United States have never been closer, they are at peace with Egypt, Iraq is tied down in a protracted struggle with Iran, and the PLO is sharply divided and still reeling

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from setbacks suffered as a result of Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon. Over the next few years, only Syria poses a significant external threat to Israel's security. [REDACTED]

26. The Israelis are worried by President Assad's dogged pursuit of strategic balance, and see it as a threat to the maintenance of an effective deterrent. The true depth of their concern is difficult to assess, however, because they have several reasons to exaggerate the Syrian threat. In many of their dealings with the United States, Israeli officials no doubt wish to preserve Israel's image as an embattled ally deserving of generous support as well as to block US arms sales to Arab countries. [REDACTED]

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27. Many Israelis believe that, because of mutually contradictory national goals, war with Syria is inevitable. Israel has not lost the will or ability to move boldly to defeat Syria. If Israel became convinced that war was imminent or the Syrian buildup had reached intolerable levels, we believe the Government of Israel—Labor or Likud—would not hesitate to launch a massive attack designed to destroy Syrian forces quickly while minimizing Israeli losses. It clearly has no desire to repeat the mistakes of 1973, when Israel misread indicators of impending attack and suffered nearly 10,000 casualties. [REDACTED]

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Short-Term Concerns

28. The Israelis see the most immediate—albeit limited—Syrian threat in Lebanon. They believe that Assad still hopes to force a total Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon, largely through encouraging ongoing Palestinian and radical Shia guerrilla attacks. The incremental reintroduction of Syrian forces into the southern al Bika' Valley also worries Israel. The Israelis expect that Assad will continue to move some troops into the field fortifications near the eastern boundaries of their security zone. However, should the Syrians exceed the 1976-82 level (about a brigade), the risk of an Israeli military response would increase markedly. [REDACTED]

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29. Since last November's shootdown of two Syrian MIG-23s, the Israelis have sought, principally through diplomatic measures, to defuse the situation, and have restricted punitive operations in Lebanon to radical Shia and Palestinian targets in and near the security zone. Israel has tried to avoid a clash with Syrian air and air defense forces stationed along the Lebanese-Syrian border by moving generally westward its regular reconnaissance flight paths over Lebanon. Israel also has not confronted Syrian troops moving into the southern al Bika' [REDACTED]

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30. The Israelis fear, however, that the Syrians may mistake restraint for weakness and undertake bolder challenges. Peres has had to fend off pressure from some senior Israeli commanders who want to bolster Israel's capability to deter Syria through limited retaliation against Syrian forces or their Shia and Palestinian clients. [REDACTED]

Potential for a Strike

31. A number of events, including a successful terrorist attack Israel believed was supported by Syria, a marked increase in Syrian troops in the southern al Bika', or increased Syrian air operations over Lebanon, might trigger a military response that could initiate an escalatory spiral. Peres's first move in these contingencies probably would be to seek diplomatic action through the United States. Yitzhaq Shamir as prime minister, however, probably would be more inclined to use force against Syria. In the short term, Labor's continuing presence in the coalition—particularly its equal share of posts in the 10-member executive inner cabinet—probably would help restrain Likud hardliners led by Ariel Sharon. [REDACTED]

32. Given the current mood of the Israeli electorate, Likud is unlikely to be able to establish a government without Labor during the next few years. Nonetheless, if Likud were to do so—through a set of circumstances that we cannot anticipate—its leaders probably would be more inclined than Peres to counter perceived Syrian challenges with military force. If Ariel Sharon became prime minister or defense minister, the prospect of an Israeli attack would substantially increase. [REDACTED]

Israel's Decisionmaking Calculus

33. Despite occasional rhetorical excesses regarding the Syrian threat, the Israelis are currently confident they could defeat Syria quickly in a general war. [REDACTED] if the Syrians launched an attack to win back at least part of the Golan Heights, Israel would quickly push them back and occupy additional Syrian territory. Such a victory over the Syrians, however, would be costly and the Israelis, therefore, would prefer to avoid full-scale war. [REDACTED]

34. If the Israelis made the political decision that the Syrian buildup had reached intolerable levels, they would consider preventive action. The degree of intolerance is a highly subjective political/military judgment, not a rigid military calculation. Hence, it is flexible and more subject to prevailing domestic and

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foreign influences, including US pressure. Major factors in the Israeli calculus—highly scenario dependent—include Syria’s ability to inflict significant casualties and severely limit Israeli military options. Already some hardliners are arguing that restoring the Israeli deterrent now by attacking Syria would be less costly than waiting until it makes further improvements. A Likud-dominated government, for example, might not have tolerated Syria’s chemical weapons progress, and perhaps would have already struck preemptively against it—as Begin’s government did in 1981 against Iraq’s nuclear program.

Military Capabilities and the Conduct of War

Syria’s Growing Strength

35. Syria has achieved rough numerical parity with Israel, although the quality of its forces lags far behind Israel’s in many key areas. Therefore, Syria will not reach a strategic balance with Israel. The best Syria can achieve is numerical superiority in certain weapon systems and, if deliveries of infantry fighting vehicles and new model tanks continue, important qualitative improvements in armored equipment. Neither the effectiveness of most of these weapon systems nor Syrian capability to operate them will prove an adequate counterbalance to Israeli military power.

36. Despite efforts to remedy their problems, Syria’s military forces currently suffer from structural deficiencies, a shortage of skilled manpower, poor training, inadequate command and control, inability to conduct effective combined arms operations, and lackluster leadership. In addition, the Syrian military still tends to place inordinate blame on the shortcomings of Soviet weaponry, which is typified by its concern over the performance of Libya’s SA-5s against US aircraft during the spring 1986 clashes over the Mediterranean Sea. As a result, Syria continues to place more emphasis on extracting new, sophisticated weapons from the USSR than on addressing the critical problems of operational effectiveness and force integration.

37. **Ground Forces.** The principal strengths of the Syrian Army are its large size—it has grown from a wartime strength of 170,000 in 1980 to over 300,000 today—and its increasing inventory of modern Soviet-designed weapons.

38. **Air Force.** The major thrust in building up the Syrian Air Force continues to be expansion and modernization of equipment, particularly through the receipt of advanced aircraft. During the next few years, Syria will continue the buildup in its fixed-wing fighter and ground attack force.

39. The Syrian Air Force has made some limited progress in nighttime intercept and ground attack capabilities, antiradiation missile launch tactics, and the use of automated data links. However, it continues to use stereotyped training and operational procedures. This discourages pilot initiative, and requires strict dependence on ground control intercept operations, which are susceptible to Israeli countermeasures. As a result, the Syrian Air Force will not be capable of the kind of complex, aggressive tactics that would pose a threat to the IAF in air-to-air combat.

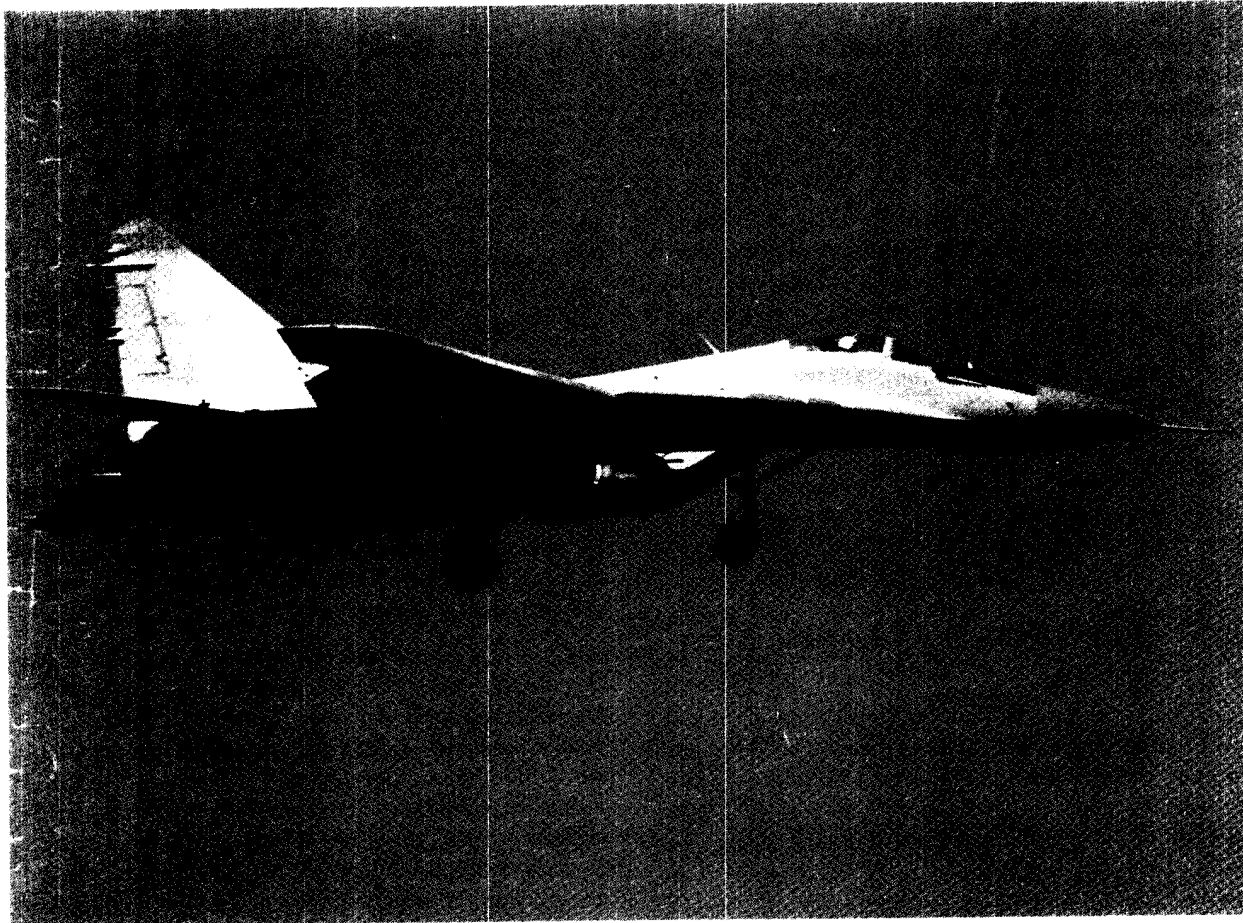
40. **Air Defense Forces.** Syria is moving to shore up its air defense system. Completion of a third SA-5 complex near Izra and a fourth west of Hims will improve Syria’s long-range air defense coverage and its capability to fire at targets operating over Israel and the Mediterranean Sea. The recent deployment of SA-2s, along with additional tactical missiles near the Lebanese border, thickens air defense coverage and impedes Israeli reconnaissance operations.

41. Syria is enhancing its early warning capabilities and tightening air defense command and control, both in Syria and Lebanon. As the movement of the SA-2s to the Lebanese border indicates, Damascus is willing to experiment with the capabilities of its air defense forces, which are hampered more by deficiencies in equipment than by training.

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Figure 3
MIG-23 Fulcrum Fighter



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42. *Navy.* Modernization of the Syrian Navy continues to lag badly. The recent acquisition of two obsolete R-class attack submarines marks the beginning of an undersea warfare capability, but it is unlikely they will be effective even after they are ready for duty late next year. Consequently, the Syrian Navy's only real threat to Israel may be the SSC-1b, a coastal defense cruise missile with a range of 300 kilometers. [redacted]

Assaulting the Golan Heights: The "Cold Start"²

43. Syria's ability to retake the Golan Heights would depend on the highly unlikely achievement of strategic surprise, which would enable it to begin a concerted air and ground attack before Israel acted to preempt the operation with the massive use of its

"Cold Start" means a sudden offensive from existing garrisons and deployments [redacted]

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airpower, and before Israeli mobilization was well under way. For example, the Syrians would need to avoid a general mobilization—which almost certainly would be detected by the Israelis—by building up the peacetime manning of their forces. While completing final preparations, Damascus would be very careful not to provoke the Israelis with inflammatory rhetoric, or a flurry of high-level visits. Only the most senior Syrian military officers would likely be privy to the timing and details of the assault. [REDACTED]

44. The Syrians would want to be able to exploit breakthroughs rapidly, while remaining ready to parry an Israeli counterattack. While Damascus would expect the Israelis to retaliate in force, Syria might entertain some hope that forces arrayed in depth would persuade the Israelis not to advance, but instead to rely on artillery and airpower to deliver punitive strikes. [REDACTED]

45. We believe the cold start approach would fail and that Israel would quickly gain the upper hand. Even if the Soviet Union pressed hard for a cease-fire in place after an initial Syrian success, Israel would almost certainly continue fighting to regain what it had lost as well as punish the Syrians. [REDACTED]

Israeli Military Capabilities

46. Although the IDF and the Syrian armed forces are now roughly similar in size and number of major weapon systems, the Israelis will retain—and most analysts believe will increase—their superiority because of the better quality of their manpower; weapons; command, control, and communications; mobilization capability; training; and leadership. As long as the peace treaty with Egypt holds, Israel can rapidly concentrate the bulk of its forces against Syria. The Air Force is Israel's first line of defense. [REDACTED]

47. Economic austerity has forced the Israelis to cut back on training and maintenance and to retire some obsolete weapon systems, but they continue to modernize the IDF. For example, within the next few years the Israeli Air Force will receive F16C/Ds to

replace older A-4 and Kfir ground attack aircraft in operational service. The Israeli Army is proceeding with procurement of the Merkava II main battle tank and is forging ahead with development of the Merkava III, which will feature improved armor and a larger caliber gun. Israel is far ahead of Syria in the acquisition of self-propelled artillery. [REDACTED]

48. The wide margin of superiority the IDF enjoys over its adversaries derives from the superb quality of its leadership at all echelons, from the technical skills, innovation, and initiative of its personnel, and from the sophisticated, flexible, and redundant command system it employs in the execution of its operational doctrine. This doctrine emphasizes speed, shock, flanking movements, and protected firepower—maximizing Israel's advantage over its less capable Arab opponents. Israeli equipment is generally superior to that of its adversaries, as are the levels of maintenance and repair. In addition, Israeli operators are far more capable at absorbing complex weapon systems than the Arabs. [REDACTED]

49. The IAF places heavy and increasing emphasis on building and maintaining a fully integrated real time air battlefield management system that can be modified to fight multiple threats from any quarter. In addition, the IAF enjoys an enormous regional lead in electronic warfare and EW technology. The IAF has always emphasized flexibility to allow it to change its doctrine, strategy, and tactics to suit the situation in which it finds itself. [REDACTED]

50. *Israeli Reaction to a "Cold Start" Offensive.* If Syria mounted a cold start offensive to recover the Golan Heights, its lead divisions would have to attack—over extremely difficult terrain—an Israeli heavy armored division, an infantry brigade, and a battalion of 175-mm self-propelled guns deployed

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behind two antitank ditches and extensive minefields. Unless the Syrians were able to cut off reinforcements, the defenders would be quickly supported by additional units from the Northern Territorial Command, which normally controls four armored divisions and one territorial infantry division. If necessary, the Central Territorial Command's four armored and one territorial infantry divisions could be committed. [redacted]

[redacted]

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55. We estimate that, in the event of a full-scale Israeli ground offensive, the entire Syrian Army would be thoroughly defeated within no more than two weeks. [redacted]

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[redacted]

[redacted] Israel probably would hold such territory as a bargaining chip in any future disengagement negotiations [redacted]

52. *Israeli Preventive/Preemptive Attack.* If the Israelis were convinced that war was imminent or that the Syrian buildup had reached intolerable levels, they would not hesitate, in our judgment, to launch an attack designed to destroy Syrian forces rapidly and eliminate the Syrian military as a serious threat for years to come. Israel is sensitive to casualties, however, and would pursue a strategy designed to wreak maximum havoc with minimal loss of Israeli lives. [redacted]

Warning Capabilities

56. Syrian and Israeli forces are usually in a high state of readiness, and major elements of these forces are arrayed opposite each other along the Golan Heights. This significantly complicates the task of providing timely, unambiguous warning of hostilities, which depends on the detection and evaluation of enough key indicators to convince policymakers that war is imminent. [redacted]

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57. The number and validity of the indicators of hostility vary over time and from country to country—as does the decisionmaking calculus of the policymakers. While Syria, with qualitatively inferior forces, is currently trying to avoid seriously provoking Israel, Damascus cannot allow the Israelis to mobilize their forces without increasing the readiness of its own forces. The Israelis are determined to avoid being surprised again as they were in 1973, but they are severely constrained by the political, military, and economic costs of ordering the large-scale callup of reservists needed to put their ground forces on a war footing. [redacted]

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Role of Outside Players

The USSR

59. The Soviets have a considerable stake in Syria, which has been the linchpin of the Soviet position in

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the Middle East since the USSR's ouster from Egypt in the early 1970s. Moscow and Damascus have been drawn together by some common objectives, but it is the USSR's lack of alternative avenues of influence in the region and Syria's need for superpower backing and lack of alternative sources of military support that cement their relationship [redacted]

60. We believe Moscow remains determined not to tie itself to a specific response in the event of another Israeli-Syrian war. In specific cases, however, the Soviets have increased their commitment. For example, the dispatch to Syria of Soviet-manned SA-5s, from 1983 to 1985, committed Moscow to Syria's defense to a greater degree than before. [redacted]

61. We believe the Soviets share our assessment that Syria would be defeated in a war with Israel, and we judge that they would not see a Syrian-Israeli war in their interest. They would be embarrassed, as they have been in the past, when their client lost using Soviet-made equipment and they were unable to be of much help. The inevitable resupply would be costly, and perhaps most important, the Soviets want to avoid a crisis that could lead to direct confrontation with the United States and Israel. [redacted]

62. **Moscow's Ability To Influence Syrian Decisionmaking.** Despite the wide scope of their presence in Syria, we believe the Soviets have little ability to affect Assad's policymaking in matters of importance to Syria. As noted earlier, the Soviets do not have the ability to veto Assad if he decided to initiate a war against Israel. [redacted]

63. [redacted]

[redacted] Moscow is unable to exert decisive influence over Assad and regards him with considerable mistrust [redacted] when the USSR is known to have attempted to use its military relationship to pressure the Syrians to change their policy [redacted] it failed. [redacted]

64. **The Likely Limits of Soviet Support.** It is likely that Assad would not even consult the Soviets in the event he decided to launch an attack on the Golan Heights, despite his need for Soviet support. He probably would calculate Moscow would have no choice but to back Syria fully. In this case, the Soviets almost certainly would counsel restraint once a war began, but would stop short of cutting off his arms supply if he disregarded their advice. [redacted]

65. If the Israelis conducted a swift surgical strike against targets in Syria, Lebanon, or both—and the conflict were over in a day or two—we believe the

Soviets would be unable to respond militarily in an effective way beyond using their air defense advisers to help defend against attacking Israeli aircraft. Their response would be largely political and symbolic. The Soviets would be likely to:

- Increase propaganda support for Damascus by issuing official government statements and warnings.
- Organize a UN condemnation of Israel and Washington.
- Augment Soviet naval and air presence in the eastern Mediterranean.
- Dispatch high-level military and/or political delegations to Syria.
- Resupply Syria with any equipment it lost and possibly introduce newer systems. (S NF)

66. We know of no Soviet commitment to deploy combat forces to Syria in the event of a full-scale Syrian-Israeli war and doubt one exists. However, Soviet credibility with Syria and the rest of the Arab world would be at risk. Moreover, other Soviet clients and friends in the Third World might doubt the efficacy of close ties to Moscow if it were again willing to see a beleaguered friend defeated. [redacted]

67. A decision to deploy Soviet forces to help defend Syrian territory would be a difficult one and would only be considered in the context of an Israeli march on Damascus or if the Syrian regime were on the verge of collapse. The Kremlin would be keenly aware that such a move could prompt a US response—such as an alert of American forces, as in the 1973 war—and risk a crisis that could spiral into a US-Soviet military confrontation. Moreover, the probable brevity of Syrian-Israeli hostilities would make significant Soviet military intervention logistically difficult. If the Soviets met opposition, especially interdiction of their sea and air lines of communications, they probably would not be able to successfully deploy and sustain significant ground or air forces to Syria. Given some lead time, they could send a limited contingent of Soviet forces within several days—such as an airborne regiment or elements of the Black Sea Fleet naval infantry brigade—but such forces would be no match for the Israelis and probably would be intended only as a trip-wire aimed at convincing the Israelis to stop their advance and prompting the United States to pressure Israel to enter a cease-fire. [redacted]

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68. In the event of hostilities, we would expect Soviet advisers serving with Syrian forces to participate in hostilities. The Soviets almost certainly would pass to the Syrians near-real-time intelligence collected from their satellites, ships located in the eastern Mediterranean, and any reconnaissance aircraft that were in the region at the time. It is likely they would augment their naval forces in the eastern Mediterranean from the Black Sea Fleet or Indian Ocean Squadron. The Soviets probably also would make a demarche to Washington seeking restraint of Israel and support for a cease-fire, as they have done in past Arab-Israeli wars. [REDACTED]

The Role of Other Arab States

69. None of the other Arab states is likely to make a major military contribution to Syria's war effort. Jordan and Iraq are the only two Arab states that could make significant contributions in a timely manner directly to the Syrian front. *Jordan*, despite its improved—but still tenuous—relations with Syria, remains deeply reluctant to get involved in another Arab-Israeli war. King Hussein is concerned that any future Syrian-Israeli conflict may expand into northern Jordan; he probably will do all he can to avoid giving either belligerent an excuse to operate there. Should the Israelis try to move through northern Jordan to outflank Syrian defenses on the Golan Heights, however, we would expect the Jordanians to mount a vigorous defense. [REDACTED]

70. If its war with Iran were over and the Ba'th party retained control, *Iraq* would offer—at best—only token military aid to Syria in a war with Israel. Baghdad would condemn Israel and call on other Arabs to block aggression against Arab states. Baghdad would feel the need to protect its Arab nationalist credentials and deny Syria's claim as sole defender of the Arabs. The Iraqis might send a few squadrons of aircraft to Syria but are unlikely to send more than a division of ground forces, because a larger force would cause logistic problems and weaken Iraqi defenses against Iran. [REDACTED]

71. *Iran* would offer to send lightly armed Revolutionary Guard or volunteer troops to aid Syria against Israel whether or not the war with Iraq was continuing. Because of the deterioration of its armed forces, however, Iran would be unable to offer Syria military equipment. Tehran probably would urge its Lebanese Shia adherents to increase their operations against northern Israel. [REDACTED]

72. *Saudi Arabia* would move swiftly to provide cash assistance and diplomatic support to Damascus,

but would try to avoid becoming embroiled in a Syrian-Israeli military clash. Riyadh also would press Washington hard to contain the Israelis and to mediate the conflict. Few, even among the military, would favor sending military forces to Syria's aid; Riyadh would not want to risk possible Israeli retaliatory attacks against Saudi targets. If Assad appealed publicly to Saudi King Fahd for military forces or if the Arab League moved to provide troops, however, the Saudis would feel compelled to send a token ground force—albeit slowly. [REDACTED]

73. *Egypt* is very unlikely to intervene militarily in the event of Israeli-Syrian hostilities no matter which power starts the conflict. Nonetheless, Egyptian public opinion almost certainly would not permit President Mubarak to remain completely neutral. At a minimum, we would expect him to further cool Egypt's "cold peace" with Israel by downgrading further Cairo's already frail relations with Tel Aviv. Various normalization initiatives—including negotiations over the disputed Taba enclave and the return of Egypt's ambassador—would be shelved indefinitely. However, Cairo's formal commitment to the peace treaty with Israel almost certainly would remain intact, if only to preserve the massive flows of US aid necessary to keep Egypt's ailing economy afloat. [REDACTED]

74. In the event of a Syrian attack aimed at recapturing the Golan Heights, Mubarak probably would attempt to minimize damage to Egyptian interests by steering a middle course between the United States and Israel on the one hand, and Syria and the Arab consensus on the other. Egypt's traditional rivalry with Syria for leadership in the Arab world would deter him from openly joining ranks with Damascus. However, we believe pressure from public opinion would almost certainly force Mubarak to adopt more pro-Arab positions and cool relations with Israel and the United States. [REDACTED]

75. *Libya* almost certainly would provide active political and diplomatic support to Syria in the event of war between Syria and Israel. Despite occasional friction in his relations with Damascus, Qadhafi would view such a war—regardless of which country struck the first blow—as an opportunity to promote an Arab-Israeli confrontation, derail efforts to promote a negotiated peace, and project Libya as a leader of Arab resistance to Israel. Tripoli would be especially active in the Arab League and international forums in pushing for Arab and Third World solidarity with [REDACTED]

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Syria and in seeking material gestures of support for Damascus. In addition, Qadhafi probably would seek to link an outbreak of hostilities between Syria and Israel to US actions against Libya; he probably would attempt to exploit the fighting to force Arab moderates to denounce US policy toward Libya as well as Syria, and probably would push them to adopt sanctions against the United States. [REDACTED]

76. In addition to these political measures, we believe Tripoli would make every effort to send at least token amounts of men and materiel to support Syrian combat against Israel, but would not be able to deliver enough to affect the balance in the war. [REDACTED]

Implications for the United States

77. Either a limited or large-scale Israeli-Syrian conflict would adversely affect US interests, serving to highlight close ties to Israel to the detriment of those to moderate Arab states. Arabs in general would believe that there had been collusion between the United States and Israel, particularly in a scenario involving an Israeli preemptive attack on Syria. Any provision of wartime aid to Israel by the United States (such as might be needed in a prolonged conflict) would undoubtedly become public knowledge and would generate considerable popular and official Arab outrage. [REDACTED]

78. US relations with moderate Arab states, especially Saudi Arabia and Egypt, would suffer if Israel and Syria clashed, with the degree and prolongation of damage partly determined by the severity of the conflict. States such as Saudi Arabia, which ordinarily prefer to de-emphasize Arab-Israeli issues, would be compelled to lend significant official support to the Syrians. The United States would receive heavy public criticism. In the near term, on the heels of the US strike against Libya and the difficulties Jordan and Saudi Arabia have had in obtaining arms from the United States, a Syrian-Israeli conflict would further erode US relations with most moderate Arab states. [REDACTED]

79. Syria probably would call for and succeed in convening an Arab summit focused on the Arab-Israeli issue with strong anti-US overtones. In the heated atmosphere that would exist in the wake of a major Syrian-Israeli war, moderate Arab states would be under compelling pressure to convene a summit on terms favorable to Syria. Nevertheless, we do not believe a consensus in support of taking concrete measures against the United States—such as economic retaliation—would emerge at such a summit unless the conflict were prolonged [REDACTED]

80. Terrorism against US and Israeli interests undoubtedly would increase in the event of another significant Syrian-Israeli confrontation. Radical groups operating with or without direct Syrian, Libyan, or Iranian support would strike at Israeli or US targets, most likely in the Middle East or Europe. For a short time, it would also be far more difficult for the United States to gain even very limited cooperation from moderate Arab governments on countering such terrorism. [REDACTED]

81. Nevertheless, a war is the most likely catalyst for serious movement in the peace process. The United States is still the only major power that can engage in a meaningful dialogue with both sides, and if a dialogue were to emerge the United States would almost certainly play the key mediating role. The United States would be in the best position to mediate if the war were clearly started by Syria and if the United States were not widely accused of collaborating with Israeli aggression. [REDACTED]

82. If the war resulted in a rapid Israeli victory, the United States could profit from the strategic shift resulting from the loss of Syrian power and influence. A Syria that had suffered a devastating defeat might be less able to stymie future US peace efforts or to threaten US allies in the region. On the other hand, a triumphant Israel would have even less incentive to make concessions to the Arabs. Should Israeli forces deal Syria a massive blow, new opportunities—and risks—for all the players would develop in Lebanon as well. [REDACTED]

Implications for Regime Stability

83. Syria probably would not experience serious political instability as a result of a limited war. On the other hand, if Syria suffered a defeat that was widely viewed by Syrians inside and outside the regime as a national humiliation, it could place Assad's regime in jeopardy. [REDACTED]


84. Among the moderate Arab states in general, we would not expect to see serious instability. Public expressions of frustration would most likely be directed against the United States, not the respective governments. Nevertheless, in order to lessen the likelihood of resentment building against the various governments concerned, most of them will provide Syria with strong public support, allow their media to bitterly condemn the United States for its close ties to Israel, and take at least temporary measures to lessen the visibility of their own cooperation with the United States. [REDACTED]

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85. The one moderate Arab government that might encounter internal problems in the wake of a sizable Syrian-Israeli armed conflict is that of Egypt's President Mubarak. Criticism of the government's Israeli

connection would intensify, and public demonstrations and disorders probably would occur. We judge, however, that President Mubarak and his government would weather the storm. 

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